

## LEJoG de Matt Day 13 Part 2

After plummeting like a stone for many miles, I had my lunch on the edge of a main road, sat beside a small bridge that looked in on a small cottage. The landscape wasn't quite alpine anymore, but still remote and wild. Still, I would have to confront civilisation soon; I was going to run out of the great B-roads I'd been on all day and would have to negotiate a busy-looking, dual-carriage A-road into Inverness. There were a few ways to avoid the road, but, since I didn't have a detailed ordnance survey map, I was a little wary of going off-piste. Some seemed to be part of the national cycle network, which I had learned not to trust.

Before then, however, there was a 5 mile short cut on a quiet road. Although I was cycling on the flat for the first time all day, it was straight into a stiff northwesterly wind, the first time during the entire trip that I had to confront a headwind. It was exhausting in a completely different way than a steep hill. With hills you can build momentum, even only in your mind, and you know that the summit will come eventually, followed typically by a descent. A stiff breeze is relentless. The more you struggle against it, the more it seems to pick up and smack you upside the head, telling you in no uncertain terms that it's the boss. You might turn a corner, and it might wane for a moment or two, but then it hits back at you with no warning at all. Like King Canute's waves, wind is impossible to fight, making your beefiest efforts see infantile and pathetic.

Of course other creatures weren't so shackled to the whims of the breeze. I heard a series of shrill peals and looked up, way up, to see a massive raptor soaring hundreds of feet above me. I wondered what it was. I remember sitting on a bus with Michelle on the Isle of Mull with a gaggle of English pensioners, travelling to Iona. Every few minutes or so, one of our fellow passengers would exclaim, 'Look! In the sky! It's an eagle!' The bus driver would snort derisively, 'No it's not. It's just a buzzard.' By the time we got to the Iona ferry, the driver's patience had worn out and he muttered audibly, 'For the last bloody time, it's just a bloody buzzard, ye daft beggar!' Luckily the elderly passengers didn't hear. Unluckily, during their eagle-spotting they missed seeing a number of whales that broke the waves as we drove past.

Well, this couldn't be a 'tourist eagle'. It was way too big and the tips of its feathers fanned out the way eagles' feathers were supposed to. Plus it simply had a majesty that smaller raptors lacked. Not that spotting a buzzard, kestrel or even a sparrow hawk wasn't cool, but this was something special. I ended up following it for a good few miles, forgetting about the wind, as I watched it soar on invisible currents. Some of the hills I had careened down had felt like flying, not quite the same,

of course, but similar, I supposed. A similar liberation from the surly bonds of earth. I was very sorry when the bird glided over a hill and out of sight, but felt grateful all the same.

Soon after, the enjoyable, if windswept, B-road ended at a dual carriageway. It didn't look like much fun. I noticed on the map that there was a side road that appeared to parallel the main road and, as such, would be immeasurably more pleasurable to the A-road, but it seemed to end abruptly. Something about it rubbed me the wrong way, so I opted to take my chances on the A-road.

It was miserable. Lorries, boy-racers and camper vans seemed to dominate, pushing me further to the periphery. After the beauty of the Highland roads, this was unbearably ugly and grim. But, just as I was starting to wonder if I'd survive the remaining nine miles to Inverness, I noticed a cycle path sign to the left. Anything was better than what I was on, so I decided to take it.

Finally, I had made a good choice. The road was nearly abandoned, yet in fairly good condition. One of the only other road users I encountered was a fellow cyclist approaching from the opposite direction. He was a shaggy fellow, whose yellow rain jacket was bundled awkwardly amongst his set of four panniers and assorted other baggage. He rather inefficiently jogged up and down on his pedals, well off his saddle, chugging up the not insignificant hill. He was clearly headed for the tip of Cornwall and I wondered what his chances were. I also realised that I was way closer to my goal than he was to his. It was a good feeling, but also a little sad. I would soon have to head back home, back to the computer and the library. My counterpart, no matter what he would encounter during his journey, was only on the fringes of his adventure. Belying my doubts, he gave me a broad, wild, boyish grin as he passed. He was having a good time so far.

The cycle path to Inverness was undeniably prettier and calmer, but it was also about twice as long as the direct route and my legs were really starting to feel the effects of the hills. It had the drawbacks that many cycle paths it seemed to be a good route in some ways - this particular one took me through some neolithic sites and the Culloden Battleground, but it certainly wasn't an A to B route. And this is a problem, I think, with the cycle paths. There should be, for example, an A to B LEJoG route that is safe, relatively traffic-free, but also a direct route. Too much of the cycle network seems haphazard and random designed seemingly for people who don't cycle. Granted, most LEJoGers take the westerly route through Scotland, but if you came my way, really the only other way, you had to either cope with a nasty dual carriageway or go twice the distance. It was annoying having to make those sort of choices, especially after clambering up mountains with 50 pound panniers. I'd rather have to make decisions about whether or not to detour to Culloden and

pay money to tramp around the battle site rather than debate about A-roads and getting lost. I understand that most people using National Cycle Routes are probably just toodling out for a few miles close to their home, but when something is called 'National Cycle Route', some joined-up thinking would be appreciated.

In the end, I was exhausted and decided to continue to head on to Inverness. I did manage to glance over at some Americans (I could just tell) stumbling through the Culloden heath seemingly looking for cannonballs or something while I was taking a leak on a stone wall, but that was about it. I'll have to do it more justice next time around.